COMMUNION MEDITATION
MARK 14:22-25
1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26
SEPTEMBER 9, 1973

It's rather a cliche (well-worn) but the fact is that "those who do not understand and learn from History are bound to repeat it." Consider, for instance the whole matter of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. - its meaning and practice by the church.

For our purposes this A.M. the story begins

In the year 1215, the 4th Lateran Council declared that the bread and wine of the Mass become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. The substance of bread and wine become, miraculously, another substance. The doctrine is called "Transubstantiation".

The effect of that doctrine was officially to remove the sacrament from the people. For some sound reasons — If you are handling the very body and blood of Jesus you don't want to be messy about it. It needs to be done with great care and dignity and ceremony. Children obviously ought to know what they are doing and to be able to do it with coordination and grace. (none should be spilled) In fact, it would be better if the sacramental act were done only by those who understood it. It was a pragmatic decision, really. And thus the Lord's Supper came to be celebrated by the clergy, literally walled off from the common people by ornate stone screens, speaking in a language no one understood, around a high altar.

That's one of the things the Reformers intended to reform in the 16th century. John Knox scandalized the whole of Great Britain by bringing the elements out from behind that screen: by breaking bread and pouring a goblet of wine right in front of their eyes - and then distributing it among them. Men were arrested and tortured and executed for doing that: for reinstating the Sacrament as an act of God's people - which depends on His goodness and His Grace. They wanted it done weekly, every Lord's Day, by all the people openly, regularly, joyfully.

But then history began, once again, to repeat itself. The Sacrament became so special - so holy - that slowly it was removed from the people. Instead of a weekly celebration it became occasional: monthly, quarterly, yearly. And once that happened - once it was not seen as the appropriate thing for Christian people to do when they gathered for worship - it regained it's old status - as a mysterious, awesome ritual to be done with the greatest of care, dignity and ceremony. In the more remote areas of the Scotish Highlands - that direction comes to it's logical conclusion. People stay home! when Communion is celebrated - so filled are they with a sense of their own unworthiness

and the Sacraments holiness. It's almost as if the Reformation never happened.

We are trying, honestly, today to understand and learn from history, and therefore, not to repeat it. We are trying by celebrating the Sacrament more frequently; not in order to lessen it's significance, but rather to affirm it's centrality in the life of the Church.

And we are trying, finally, by including our children in the celebration. In the past our behavior has been inconsistant with our words. We have said, for instance, "The Holy Table is none other than Christ's Table. He invites those who put their trust in him to share in the feast which he has prepared". We have said, in Baptism, "This child is now a part of the church." And then, at the very moment when the Church is celebrating its most appropriate ritual we have said, "Wait a minute: you have to be twelve and go to communicants class and join the Church in order to get in on this."

Two years ago the General Assembly acted to end that inconsistancy. Baptized Children of believers are welcome at the Lord's Table.- if the Session agrees - and if the parents deem it appropriate. The session of this congregation agrees. Parents are the ones who shall decide when their children may participate in the sacrament. That policy is in effect here everytime we observe Communion. But today, particularly, we are holding it up and thinking about it - and celebrating a new freedom to stand together with those dearest to us before a table that is none other than Christ's.

Freedom implies responsibility. If you have decided to bring your children to the Table it is your special task to talk about it with them. They don't need to understand - intellectually - any more than you do. What they need is some feel for the significance of the act - that we remember Jesus Christ when we do it - that it is God's way of saying that he loves us very much - that it is our way of saying that we love each other very much.

That - by way of a rationale which your worship committee asked me to provide on this occasion.

And now, for a few brief moments, think with me about what we do today.

"Do this in remembrance of me". It is a time to remember: that's what I do with those minutes while the elements are being distributed. I remember - last year - and the special joy of sitting with my family for the first time and serving the elements to my children.

I remember Maundy Thursdays and the loaf and pitcher passed up and down the tables in the Fellowship Hall.

I remember - always in those minutes - the first time I presided at communion - one week after I was ordained - as a guest minister in a tiny Pennsylvania Parish.

I remember communion on the day of Seminary graduation - a loaf passed among us as we stood around the table - and the black friend who wouldn't get a job.

I remember communion as a child - my parents = my brother squirming - that I liked it because the sermon was shorter that day. I remember taking communion for the first time and being disappointed that I didn't feel transported on the wings of angels.

I remember - now - more each year - that part of the theological baggage we Christians carry around is something called "The Communion of Saints": that there is something in the Sacrament that affirms an eternal relationship with those who are gone. Not at all in the sense of an ecclesiastical seance. But that somehow relationships of love survive death: that no relationship dies: that they are safe and free in a way I can only imagine. So the list grows each year. . . .

A favorite uncle was buried last Monday = and I'll remember him today. And on back - and back and back to Him - to the one who comes and goes in our life: sometimes leaving us to our own devices, but at other times looking us right in the face: a judge - sometimes = but with a smile on his face: a persistant challenge to do more - be more - give more: but a friend - a brother who cares. Back to the one who took those twelve men to an upper room and said words to them that made it impossible for them ever to eat without remembering.

"Everytime you eat this bread and drink this wine you show forth the Lord's death". "This bread - this wine". It wasn't special. Not communion wafers and Mogen David Communion Wine or Welch's Grape Juice. It was what they were eating for dinner. It might have been fish and dried olives except that bread and wine lent themselves to the symbolism he wanted to share.

The point of it was that they stood for his body and blood - represented him in all their mundane ordinariness. God, that is to say, uses some pretty common things - some pretty ordinary experiences - to dispense his grace. In fact - all the "things" of creation become the means of grace if you hear the words correctly.

A man told me a story this summer that I found very moving and I would share it with

you. He was a Scot, a Prisoner of War in the German camp somewhere in Poland. He was also a Presbyterian, later - after the war - to become a minister. In the camp starvation was rampant: many men had died - and he - the teller of the story - was weak and sick. For days he had nothing to eat. One night a Polish Roman Catholic dug under the fence - and in the dark thrust an onion and a jug of water into his hands with the words "The Body and Blood of Christ for you my brother."

There's something of that going on whenever we celebrate communion. Frederick Buechner defines sacrament as a time "when something holy happens" and goes on to ~~xxxxx~~ comment: "...the Church isn't the only place where the holy happens. Sacramental moments can occur at any moment, any place, and to anybody. Watching something get born. A high school graduation. Somebody coming to see you when you are sick. A meal with people you love. Looking into a stranger's eyes and knowing he's not a stranger.

If we weren't blind as bats we might see that life itself is sacramental." (~~82-83 Wishful Thinking~~)

That's what it means to hold up these items - bread and wine: insignificant in and of themselves - but vehicles of God's grace - God's presence - God's love for you and me. (k)

So let us stand together around these tables - with our little ones -with each other: to remember - to affirm - to receive God's grace. AMEN

Father, we would come to your table as children. Help us - in this act - to sense again thy mystery of your love - your hiddeness in the common things of creation: your presence in our relationships with each other: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

(k) symbols of the Body + Blood of Christ -
but also symbols of God's creation - and the Holy in it:
symbols of all the food we eat - of all our relationships - and his constant coming to us - making the ordinary Holy.